

Review of R. A. Brown, 'The Normans and the Norman Conquest'

Article

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R.A. Brown

The Normans and the Norman Conquest

(Boydell and Brewer, Woodbridge, Second Edition, 1985) viii + 288 pp

Professor Brown's *The Normans and the Norman Conquest* has enjoyed a considerable reputation since it was first published in 1969. In the meantime publications on the Normans have continued to flow, and every year since 1978 the annual Battle Conference, which he has himself organised, adds impressively to modern understanding of the Norman impact. In presenting this second edition of his book, Brown claims to have taken account of all the new work on or relating to the subject published since 1969, and appears to be gratified that the text required comparatively little amendment. Rewriting affects less than 10% of the text, and reference to recent work in the footnotes does not necessarily imply that the text itself has been modified. The most substantial revision comes in the chapter on Normandy where suggestions made by Le Patourel about the development of the tenth-century duchy have prompted the rewriting of the two pages of the first paragraph. However, he makes no use of Dr Bate's recent book on *Normandy before 1066* 'because I disagree with so much of it', without giving further explanation. Such an approach hardly involves taking account of all the new work for this subject, as the phrase is normally understood. Another extensive revision in the same chapter relates to Norman feudalism, a matter on which Brown expresses himself forcefully, but his views are still based on those of Haskins and Navel and not of Mrs Chibnall, whose paper at Battle in 1982 is thus rather misleadingly cited in the footnote. It is hardly possible to argue with an historian who writes 'One might, indeed, argue that the less defined, systematized and uniform Norman feudalism of the earlier eleventh century is shown to have been, the more truly feudal it was.' Brown has made himself the champion of 'true feudalism', so when treating of English Feudalism, he refers to Professor Holt's Battle paper of 1983 because it 'essentially vindicates Round's cataclysmic thesis', without seeing any need to take into account the pertinent criticisms made in it of Round's views. Likewise Brown's well-known belief that pre-Conquest English administration has been recently overpraised reappears here, with fresh passages of rewriting designed to defend his case by tackling such views as those of Simon Keynes on the royal

writing-office. It will be clear therefore that Brown has not modified his views over the years in the light of more recent studies. He has concentrated with characteristic bravado on repairing the breaches under attack.

Brown claims that 'the Norman Conquest is notoriously controversial, to my mind unfortunately and unreasonably so', and that it should be possible to appreciate the 'accomplishments of the Anglo-Saxons (who are not 'us') without undertaking the manifest absurdity of decrying the amazing achievements of the Normans (who are not 'them')', from which tendentious statement it is not surprising to learn that 'if it were necessary to take sides' Brown would 'be with duke William at Hastings'. Brown's enthusiasm for the Normans is never in doubt, but there is no more subtlety to his explanations than there is to his prose, with its predictable adjectives and its banal poetic echoes ('Brave New World', 'first fine careless rapture', 'when beggars die there are no comets seen'.) The Norman successes are 'explained' by reference to the double heritage (Scandinavian and Carolingian), economic prosperity, expanding population, ecclesiastical revival, new aristocracy, ducal power, pre-eminence in warfare, the feudality of Norman society and lastly Duke William, 'himself the perfect instrument for the task ahead...knight of knights, fit lord and leader of a martial race, and a consummate general whose youthful, hot-headed recklessness was later controlled by an iron will to enable him to mix cool caution with bold decision...all the age and place could ask for...Fortune's favorite, (with) a near-perfect wife'. There is not much sign here of Norman shrewdness or political calculation and Brown is happiest with battles and castles and top people, showing characteristic scorn and impatience with those who do not share his opinions, and hardly troubling himself to understand why they doubt when he is certain. It is not surprising that Brown confidently presents the Normans as 'muscular Christians', 'virile and militant', providing 'entirely new management for the firm', in an age 'when not only kings but also the ruling classes really ruled'. This degree of conviction is unavoidably provocative and necessarily controversial but also rather old fashioned - rollicking stuff in the nineteenth century tradition, though in a way it is endearing to see Brown still eager to break a lance for good king William.

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